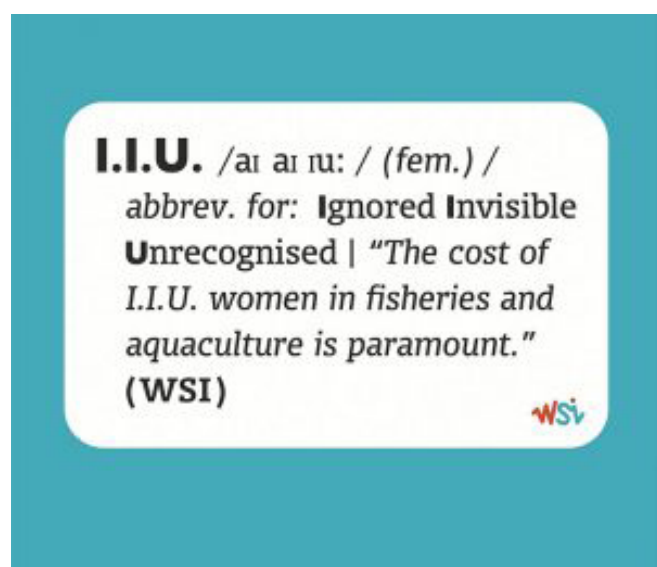


“GLASS CEILING” IN THE SEAFOOD INDUSTRY? WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

By Marie Christine Monfort

There has been an increase in the representation of women at the top levels of the seafood industry, but progress has been slow due to, among other factors, entrenched mindsets and the tendency of companies to pay more attention to issues such as the environment and sustainability. The message must go out that gender inequality is not only unfair, it also affects the profitability of businesses. Highlighting the gender gap, making the invisible visible, and raising the consciousness of leaders that their business is based on gender inequalities, represent the first move to address the challenges and make changes happen.



WSI calls on stakeholders and leaders to appropriate IIU with the same strength, concern, and budget resources that have been given to IUU.

For the third time in a row, the International Organization for Women in the Seafood Industry (WSI) has analysed the gender composition of Boards of the 100 top seafood companies¹; here it opens the conversation about the position that women occupy in seafood corporates, reasons for the imbalance and routes to follow to reduce gender prejudices. Clear understanding of the situation and genuine intentions may transform our archaic industry.

Based on the world’s 100 largest seafood companies (as listed by Undercurrent News in 2019), the top CEO positions are held by women in just 4% of the cases. Companies run by women include Bumble Bee Foods and American Seafoods Group from the USA, Marusen Chiyoda Suisan from Japan and Vinh Hoan from Vietnam. In contrast, here’s how the seafood industry compares with other industries at the rear

end of this metric: mining industry 4%; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) 3% and Oil & Gas 1%.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate the current trends. Across 80 companies, comprising 1 042 Board Directors, a mere 150 are women, i.e. 14.4%. This however still reflects progress compared to the 2016 (that sample analysed 71 companies) rate of 9.1%. To mark another improvement, the percentage of companies with less than 20% female representation on the Board has declined from 81% in 2016 to 64% in 2019. That said, there seems to be a remarkable resistance to the notion of equality between men and women: over a third of all seafood companies analysed (28 out of 80) have an exclusive male Board of Directors. No more than 5% of the companies recorded over 40% women in Boards, exactly the same ratio as 2019. If we were to place a magnifying lens on executive positions, the rate of women sadly falls down to 9%.

Table 1: Percentage of women holding Corporate Board seats in 2020, compared to 2016

	2016	2020
0%	54%	35%
< 20%	27%	29%
21% to 40%	15%	31%
41% to 50%	4%	4%
> 50%	0%	1%

Source: WSI 2020

Vinh Hoan², a Vietnamese seafood company, is the only shining light with a greater than 50% women representation at management positions. It is run by Ms. Nguyen Ngo Vi Tam, supported by 10 women and two men on the Board of Directors.

Table 2: Highest female participation in Boards in 2020: Top seafood companies

	% women in boards
Vinh Hoan (Vietnam)	83%
Zhanjiang Guolian Aquatic Products (China)	47%
Austevoll Seafood (Norway)	40%
Bumble Bee Foods (USA)	40%
SalMar (Norway)	38%
Labeyrie Fine Foods (France)	38%
Sanford (New Zealand)	36%
Sirena Group (Denmark)	35%
Grieg Seafood (Norway)	33%

Source: WSI 2020

Table 3: Percentage of women in Executive Boards, by country (2020)

Country	Total Board Directors	Number of women	% women
Japan (18)	381	18	5%
Chile (6)	99	8	8%
Norway (9)	91	25	27%
China (5)	63	18	29%
Canada (2)	56	15	27%
Spain (7)	50	7	14%
Thailand (3)	47	4	9%
USA (9)	43	6	14%
UK (4)	41	5	12%
Denmark (6)	36	9	25%
Vietnam (2)	22	11	50%

Number of companies observed in parenthesis

Source: WSI 2020 based on Undercurrent News Top 100 seafood companies 2019

Based on our results, the trend for ‘women at the top position’ is moving in the right direction, but at a very slow pace. These preliminary results tell us that compared to 2016, the year 2020 shows a slightly progressive landscape in terms of gender diversity in top positions in seafood corporates. But we are far from being gender equal on corporate Boards, with only 5% of companies having >40% females. These results also call for further research, digging into the capital structure and sources. Many companies for instance are family companies; therefore, integration of women in top

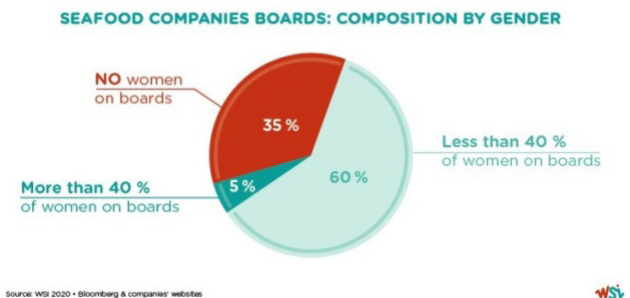
positions is a matter of kinship and not necessarily one of merit. The topic of corporate cultures deserves to be further explored to better understand the barriers and opportunities that women experience to access top positions.

Why so few women at the top?

The statistics on women in Boards reflects the so-called “glass ceiling”, picturing the low representation of women in top executive positions in the industry.

There is not one reason, but an array of explanations which all conclude that women are not to blame but that the inequality issue is ingrained in the system. As a Norwegian Minister of Fisheries expressed, “three-quarters of recruitment is down to informal networks: men recruit men. Men recruit CEOs that look like themselves. We need to challenge these attitudes³.”

Without dismissing cultural influence, the seafood industry’s incentive and advancement practices worldwide give priority to males. The informal setting (relationship, network, information flow, mentoring, etc) where the career is made, also favours men. Consequently, women are scarcely to be seen in rising through the hierarchy and this makes it more difficult to promote women to the top. We see from this scenario that the seafood industry originates from, and maintains the patriarchal system, where rules are made by men for men. In the seafood business the “off” is more powerful than the “official”.



Why is progress on the route of gender equality so slow?

It all starts at school. Why wouldn't a woman work in the seafood industry? What would make a young female disinterested in having a career in fish farming, fishing or engineering in a maritime environment? Strong gender norms and stereotypes prevent educational advisers from orienting potential female candidates towards either fishing, fish farming or engineering.

The same is seen within private companies, where leaders don't pay attention to this issue. Undoubtedly this lack of interest by leaders induces a status quo with no progress in sight, but saying that is somehow encouraging as we suggest that if leaders did pay attention, the problem would be solved or at least addressed.

It has been evidenced in multiple studies that the recruitment process is influenced by an unconscious bias that reflects a difference in perceptions and ratings of men and women. Out of every two candidates comprising a woman and a man offering exactly the same education, experience and competence, men will be chosen. The same bias slows down the advancement and progression of women up the hierarchy ladder.

In the seafood industry in particular, certain issues have received more attention, such as environmental problems. Nowadays it is unusual to find a seafood company which doesn't have a Social Corporate Responsibility policy that addresses marine environment protection through a range of precautionary or compensatory measures. Therefore in practice, environmental concerns eclipse social issues like gender inequality. Amongst other elements that could explain why gender has not been seen as a priority, we also identified a perception of incompatibility between making a profit and addressing gender inequality. Some of these comments refute the widespread and multi-evidenced idea that gender diversity increases company profits [Catalyst 2007, Mc Kinsey 2010].

Another element that reinforces misunderstandings on this issue is that talking about gender in the seafood industry is still widely perceived as a woman's issue, i.e. that only women would be concerned in improving equality conditions, with men being excluded from the discussion. The resultant lack of concern by men makes them pay little attention to the issue, and puts them off understanding their role in business organisational structure. Men are part of this social issue, they have the power to make things happen or not, yet they

have a very different perception of the situation compared to women. This is not a women's issue but a shared (across gender) societal concern, where balancing relationships between the two genders in a progressive environment is at play. We know that women are not the problem, but the system is.



**a restaurant like Nadeshico Sushi
is helping to change the environmen**

Winners of the WSI's 'Women in Seafood' video competition in 2020. The annual completion helps to increase awareness about the role of women in the industry.

What can be done?

Inequality is not an irremediable curse. Gender inequality won't be able to resist progressive laws, positive dedicated mainstream programmes in public and private sectors, and an evolution process of seafood leaders' mindsets.

We have seen that national legal frameworks have helped raise consciousness on (in) equality and have reduced it. Some binding rules such as quotas make the difference. In many regards, Norway leads the way in gender equality in the professional sphere. Thanks to a mandatory quota law introduced in 2003, the Boards of public limited companies (listed on the Oslo Stock Exchange) must have at least 40% female non-executive directors.

In the private sector, understanding and action by leaders make the difference. Ian D. Smith, CEO of Clearwater Seafoods Limited Partnership, expressed it clearly: "We want to win and we are not going to win unless we address diversity, in particular gender diversity. Stands are clear: diversity brings vision, strengthens capabilities, enhances innovation, drives customers' innovation and boosts our brand reputation. How do we address this? We have a clear policy and importantly we have developed metrics. We measure how we recruit, how we train, how we make succession planning, how we compensate. To make sure this happens requires the mindset of the leader. During my time at Clearwater Seafood and Mc Duff shellfish we have seen an increase of women in various positions across the company. Two of our nine Board of Directors are female. Three of eight of our Executive team are female. At Clearwater we continue to support the removal of systemic barriers to employment and the advancement of women in occupations or positions where they are under-represented." (WSI WATCH 2019).

Highlighting the gender gap, making the invisible visible, and raising the consciousness of leaders that their business is based on gender inequalities, represent the first move to address the challenges and make changes happen.

Under the combined pressure of calls for progress from intergovernmental institutions, justifiable requests from a growing number of women, the pressure of dedicated NGOs, and last but not least the positive influence of gender sensitive and responsible companies, the seafood industry can no longer ignore the issue. WSI is convinced that

dialogue between these multi stakeholders would help the industry and many of its segments to move towards more inclusiveness and gender equality.

Gender inequality is an unfair fact. As mentioned previously, it will not be able to resist progressive laws, positive dedicated mainstream programmes in public and private sectors, and the evolution of seafood leaders' mindsets. 🌐

References

1. *Undercurrent News December 2019: World's 100 Largest Seafood Companies 2019*
2. <http://vinhhoan.com/our-story/who-we-are-what-we-do/>
3. *Financial Times: Enlightened Norway's gender paradox at the top of business*

Glass ceiling

Marilyn Loeden: although this name may not ring a bell, most people would have heard of the "glass ceiling", the expression she first used in the late 70s to express the invisible barrier that prevents women from climbing the hierarchy ladder and succeeding. The introduction of this concept helped the realisation that women's deficiencies were not always responsible for their absence at top management positions; i.e. cultural, not personal explanations were to blame.

"Numerous research sheds light on some of the areas of the "glass ceiling", consequence of the weight of organisational norms and practices shaping the exercise of these professions that women must confront in these real "male bastions". Thus all of this research brings us closer to the situation of women in management [...], confronted by formally "neutral" processes (recruitment on the basis of a diploma or competitive examinations, promotion and performance criteria, demands of mobility) but in fact having to submit to masculine or virile cultural "work norms" (total availability, ideal model of manager, [...]) and/or "informal practices" of recruitment and promotion (co-opting process, belonging to networks, support of mentors) which tend in most cases to favour men. The minority situation of some very visible "exceptional women" allows organisations involved to put forward this feminisation -and to pride themselves on it -without at the same time threatening the masculine "balance" of the organisation." [Laufer 2013].



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